

PFLP, DFLP, PFLP-GC, Palestinian leftists

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WHAT ARE THE PFLP, THE DFLP, AND THE PFLP-GC?

Three far-left Palestinian nationalist groups that formed after the Six Day War of 1967 and pioneered terrorist strategies in the early 1970s. Once key players in Palestinian politics, these secular, Marxist fronts lost influence with the demise of their Soviet backers, their rejection of the 1990s Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the rise of Islamist groups—especially Hamas—that supplanted them as the main Palestinian opposition to former Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

The groups remained sidelined in the mid-1990s as Arafat established the Palestinian Authority, an autonomous government that ruled much of the West Bank and most of the Gaza Strip. Since the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) began in September 2000, however, these groups have tried to reassert themselves by perpetrating terrorist attacks against Israel—most dramatically, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s (PFLP) October 2001 assassination of Israeli Tourism Minister Rechavam Ze’evi. The State Department classifies the PFLP and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) as foreign terrorist organizations.

DO THESE GROUPS RECEIVE FOREIGN SUPPORT?

Yes. Syria has provided financial support, training, and safe haven to all three groups. The PFLP-GC maintains headquarters in Damascus and also receives support from Iran. Libya has also helped the PFLP.

WHAT ROLE DO THESE LEFT-WING GROUPS PLAY IN THE CURRENT CRISIS?

All three groups have made their presence felt since the outbreak of the second *intifada*, but none of them rival either Hamas or the remnants of Arafat’s al-Fatah faction, experts say. In May 2001, Israeli forces intercepted a shipment of Katyusha rockets and anti-aircraft missiles being sent by the PFLP-GC to the Gaza Strip; PFLP-GC leader Ahmed Jibril called it one of many such shipments. The PFLP assassination of Ze’evi helped escalate Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Crisis Guide: The Israeli-Palestinian

(<https://www.cfr.org/publication/13850/>) The roundup of PFLP and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) members by Palestinian security officials led to anti-Arafat protests in February 2002. But after a major Israeli incursion into Ramallah and other West Bank towns

in spring 2002, the PFLP and the DFLP urged Palestinian factions to work together. The DFLP's leader, Nayef Hawatmeh, also spoke out against suicide bombings inside Israel.

WHAT IS THE POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE?

The PFLP, which pioneered such terror tactics as airline hijackings, formed in December 1967, after the Arab states' overwhelming defeat in the Six Day War. In 1968, the PFLP joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the main umbrella organization of the Palestinian national movement, which was then committed to a strategy of "armed struggle." The PFLP became the second-largest PLO faction, after Arafat's own al-Fatah. The PFLP sought to topple conservative Arab states, destroy Israel, and apply Marxist doctrine to the Palestinian struggle, which it saw as part of a broader proletarian revolution. The group received support from the Soviet Union and China.

WHAT TERRORIST ACTIVITIES HAS THE PFLP UNDERTAKEN?

In its early years, the PFLP conducted hundreds of terrorist attacks. It is best known for pioneering the technique of international airplane hijackings in the late 1960s and 1970s—with consequences that rattled the Middle East.

- On July 22, 1968, the PFLP hijacked its first plane, an El Al flight from Rome to Tel Aviv.
- In September 1970, the PFLP hijacked three passenger planes and took them to airfields in Jordan, where the PLO was then based; after the planes were emptied, the hijackers blew them up. In response, King Hussein of Jordan decided that Palestinian radicals had gone too far and drove the PLO out of his kingdom.
- In 1972, PFLP and Japanese Red Army gunmen murdered two dozen passengers at Israel's international airport in Lod.
- In 1976, breaking a PLO agreement to end terrorism outside Israeli-held territory, PFLP members joined with West German radical leftists from the Baader-Meinhof Gang to hijack an Air France flight bound for Tel Aviv and landed the plane in Entebbe, Uganda. In a now-famous raid, Israeli commandos stormed the plane on the Entebbe tarmac and freed the hostages.
- During the latest *intifada*, PFLP gunmen shot dead Ze'evi, Israel's rightist tourism minister, in a Jerusalem hotel—the first assassination of an Israeli minister. The group has also claimed responsibility for several recent car bombings and shootings in Israel and the West Bank. In April 2002, Israeli officials foiled a PFLP attempt to blow up a Tel Aviv skyscraper with a car bomb—which could have caused massive casualties and would have marked a dramatic escalation in Palestinian terrorism.
- The group was responsible for a suicide bombing Christmas Day 2003, in which four people were killed and more than twenty were wounded.
- The PFLP and its current leader, Ahmed Jibril, were mentioned in the 2005 United Nations report into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, for allegedly assisting senior Lebanese security officials who were implicated in the 2004 car bombing that killed Hariri.

WHO IS THE LEADER OF THE PFLP?

The PFLP is currently headed by the founder and former leader of the PFLP-GC, Ahmed Jibril. Former PFLP leaders include George Habash, a Palestinian doctor from an Orthodox Christian family; Abu Ali Mustafa, who was killed in August 2001 when an Israeli helicopter fired rockets at his office in the West Bank town of Ramallah; and Ahmed Sadat, who was also based on the West Bank. In January 2002, under pressure from Israel, the Palestinian Authority arrested Sadat in connection with the Ze'evi assassination, which the PFLP said it had carried out in reprisal for the killing of Abu Ali Mustafa. ¹